



Harlow Chorus in Fine Voice

This year of multiple musical anniversaries (Purcell born in 1659, Handel died 1759, Haydn died and Mendelssohn born, both in 1809) provides rich pickings for choirs and Harlow Chorus is no exception. Last Saturday's concert provided a feast of choral delights from this ever-reliable ensemble, under the inspired direction of their new musical director Alexander Chaplin. The picture was completed by four excellent soloists and a tour-de-force from organ accompanist Paul Ayres, a long-time Chorus collaborator.

After being welcomed by Alexander (who also prefaced each group of pieces by a short description - a most welcome innovation), the concert opened with three motets by Henry Purcell - two less well-known: Hear my prayer, O Lord and Remember not Lord, our offences, followed by Rejoice in the Lord alway, otherwise known as the Bell Anthem because of its chime-like accompaniment. Here, for the first time, three of the soloists were able to show their mettle: Vanessa Heine (alto), Adam Kowalczyk (tenor) and Thomas Kennedy (bass).

Next on the composer list was Felix Mendelssohn, also with three motets but on a somewhat grander scale than those from Purcell. First, the ever-popular Hear my prayer, with its soaring soprano part ending in the beloved O for the wings of a dove, delightfully sung by the fourth soloist, Christina Petrou. Two rousing pieces, Warum toben die Heiden (Why do the heathen rage) and Richtete mich, Gott (Judge me, O God), both sung in German and new to your reviewer, concluded the first half.

The second half of the concert was entirely given over to one work: Haydn's Nelson Mass, so-called (although not by Haydn) because it is thought that a performance might possibly have been put on in Nelson's honour in 1800 at the home of Haydn's employer. Its proper title, Missa in Angustiis (Mass in Time of Distress), derives from the times in which it was composed - the year 1798 - when Napoleon was rampaging across Europe and defeating all in his path.

This Mass is arguably Haydn's greatest single composition. The combined forces before us rose magnificently to the occasion, perfectly expressing the variety of Haydn's score from the dark foreboding of the opening Kyrie to the joyous heights of the Sanctus and the heartfelt finale of the Agnus Dei and Dona nobis pacem. Haydn is always reckoned by choir members to be "a good sing" and this performance left the audience as satisfied as the singers!

But what of the fourth composer being honoured this year: George Frederick Handel? Why was he missing from the programme? Don't worry; he gets a whole concert to himself on 19 December at the chapel of King's College, Cambridge when Harlow Chorus reassembles for a performance of Messiah. On the basis of Saturday's concert, it will be a treat not to be missed!

David Samuels, 9 November 2009.